PLAYMATES IN EGYPT

AND OTHER STORIES

LEVINGER

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BY

ELMA EHRLICH LEVINGER

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To Dr. S. Benderly
friend and teacher
I dedicate this little
volume of stories
with admiration and
gratitude

PREFACE

Dear boys and girls:

Have you ever wondered how the Jewish holidays started? I am going to tell you about them in their historical order, beginning with the first of our holidays, Passover, which tells of the dawn of freedom for Israel, just as the Fourth of July is the birthday of liberty for the American people. We will follow our Jewish ancestors through the wilderness as they journey to the Promised Land; we will celebrate with them the high festivals in the golden days when our own kings ruled in Jerusalem, until at last we reach the time when Rabbi Akiba, after the destruction of the second Temple, taught the Torah to his devoted pupils. But, perhaps, you may not care to read the entire volume, story after story, in an evening or two.

And so, if you happen to be one of those precise people, who like to do everything at just the right moment, you may prefer to read each story on the particular holiday to which it relates. This is a good plan, too. And in case you are not sure in just what order the Jewish holidays come, I think I had better give you a list of them, telling you what each holiday means.

ROSH HA-SHANAH is the beginning of the Jewish year, the day of the blowing of the shofar.

YOM KIPPUR is the day of atonement, of prayer and fasting, and reconciliation with God.

SUKKOT is the festival of the fall harvest, a memorial of the journey in the wilderness.

HANUKKAH is the feast of lights, to commemorate the victories of the Maccabees over the Syrians and the re-dedication of the Temple.

PURIM is the feast of Esther, celebrating the deliverance of the Persian Jews from the hatred of Haman.

PASSOVER is the festival in memory of the passing from Egyptian bondage to freedom.

LAG BE-'OMER is the scholars' holiday, associated with Rabbi Akiba and his pupils, and the part he played in the Jewish rebellion against Roman tyranny.

SHABU'OT is the festival of the first-fruits which were brought to the Temple in Jerusalem.

TISH'AH BE-AB is a day of mourning for the destruction of the Temple.

SABBATH OF CONSOLATION is the sabbath following TISH'AH BE-AB, on which the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, beginning "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people," is read.

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PLAYMATES IN EGYPT

(A Story for Passover.)

Every day, when the sun was high in the heavens, little Rachel trudged through the hot sands which scorched her bare brown feet, a loaf of black bread in her basket and a cruse of water upon her shoulder. Thus she and many other young children of the house of Israel brought food and drink to their fathers and mothers and older brothers, who toiled from sunrise until far into the night in the brick-yards of Pharaoh, ruler of Egypt. One day it happened that Rachel was somewhat delayed in bringing the noonday meal to her parents and brother, and she made what haste she could, hurrying beneath the burning sun. But her foot slipped, and she fell, breaking her earthen cruse upon the road and spilling the water, that was

in it, upon the ground. Then Rachel sat down by the wayside and wept bitterly; for she knew that ere she could fetch more water and return with it to her parents, they would be back at their task, and, fearing the whip of the overseer, would not dare to bid her approach them, no matter how sorely they might suffer from thirst.

While she sat thus weeping, she heard a kindly voice asking: "Why grievest thou, maiden?" Looking up, she saw a youth of her own years standing beside her. He was slim and graceful, and carried himself proudly, while the golden girdle about his cool white garments and the jewelled band in his hair proclaimed him of some princely house. And Rachel drew back in fear, for she had been taught to dread every son of Egypt.

"Be not frightened, girl," said the youth, speaking softly, "for I will do thee no harm. Tell me why thou weepest, and I will seek to bring thee comfort, for no

one has ever asked succor in vain of Pethis son of Randor."

Rachel was now more frightened than before, for Randor was chief of the task-masters in the brick-yards of Pharaoh, and the children of Israel had often suffered through his hardness of heart. She would have run away from his son, but the boy detained her, and spoke comforting words to her, until her fear and terror had gone. Then she told him of the misfortune that had befallen her, and wept anew as she pointed to the broken cruse; for she grieved that her poor mother must toil all day without a drop of water to slake her burning thirst.

But Pethis laughed a little, and drew a flask from his girdle and gave it to her; and, fearing that she would come too late to her parents, he himself sought out their taskmaster, and bade him allow little Rachel to go to them. The man obeyed, though sullenly, for he knew that Randor,

the father of the youth, was a mighty man in Egypt.

This was but the beginning of the friendship between the princely boy of Egypt and the little daughter of the Hebrew slaves. Often, as Rachel passed down the road at noon, after bringing food and drink to the brick-yards, Pethis would start from the bushes by the road-side and greet her and bid her linger a while, that they might play together. For the lad had no brothers and sisters of his own, and was often very lonely for a play-fellow.

First he would spread out a feast for her upon the rocks—wheaten bread and dates and sweet wine—and she would eat and drink and be satisfied, often wishing that she might save some of the dainty food for her mother, but trembling lest any-one might come to know of her friendship with the Egyptian prince. Then, screened by the shrubs—for the lad, too, feared lest word should come to his father

that he spent many hours with a daughter of the Hebrews—the two would toss his golden ball, one to the other, or run races, which Rachel would never fail to win, for she was as fleet of foot as the wild gazelle upon the mountains. Then, wearied with play at last, they would cast themselves down to rest by a tiny stream of water that they had discovered bubbling among the rocks. Here Rachel would weave garlands from the flowers Pethis gathered and bind them about her dark braids, as she told him the stories she had heard from her father—of Abraham's leaving his home for a strange country, of Jacob who dreamed of a ladder down which great, white-winged angels descended as he slept, and of Joseph whom his brethren had sold into Egypt as a slave. In his turn, Pethis would tell her wondrous tales of the gods of his people and the deeds of strength and valor wrought by the noble warriors of his father's house.

"I am my father's only son," he would cry, raising himself upon his elbow, and looking up into Rachel's face, his eyes aglow with dreams. "Some day I will take his place and stand at Pharaoh's right hand and ride in his chariot when he goes to battle. And I will become a great warrior and the most powerful man in all Egypt. And then, Rachel, I will take thee to wife, and thou wilt no longer go about in mean rags; nay, thou wilt shine like a princess in gold and in snowy garments heavy with jewels."

"But, Pethis," Rachel reminded him one day, "how couldst thou take a despised daughter of the Hebrews to wife?"

Pethis was ready with his answer. "I will gain Pharaoh's ear and beseech him to free thy people, that they may live in ease and in comfort, even as they did in the days of Joseph," he promised.

"Then I wish that thou wert already a man, Pethis," sighed Rachel, "for my

people groan under many burdens, and my father says that, unless our God speedily sends us a deliverer, we must surely perish." She grieved as she spoke, never dreaming how soon that deliverer was to come.

For, ere many moons, strange rumors passed among the Hebrews as they toiled in the brick-yards, and Pethis told Rachel of two strangers who had appeared before Pharaoh and demanded that he set the children of Israel free. Then an age of many wonders began for Egypt—strange plagues which made the land desolate and the people afraid, from Pharaoh upon his throne to the slave who ground the corn in the court-yard. Yet Pharaoh would not listen to the word of the God of the Hebrews, and did not permit his slave-people to depart. The land groaned in those days under new afflictions, for all growing things sickened and died; the locusts swarmed above the land of Egypt; and, at last, so

terrible a darkness covered the earth, that no man from among the Egyptians dared to leave his house, but remained in terror and fear behind barred doors.

Safe within her father's hut, for there was light in the dwelling-places of the children of Israel, little Rachel sobbed in terror, for she was sore afraid; her mother wept also, but her father was strong in hope. "Fear not," he told them, "for the God of our fathers has wrought these wonders through His servant, Moses. And still greater wonders will He perform ere Pharaoh will permit us to depart."

Even as he spoke, Rachel's brother rushed into the house. "Father," he cried, and his face was white with a strange terror, "it is as the man of God has said: the Lord has passed through the midst of Egypt, and the first-born of every house of Egypt lies dead—from the first-born of Pharaoh upon his throne unto the first-born of the captive that is in the dungeon.

For the Lord has slain the first-born son in every household of Egypt; only the eldest of the sons of Israel has He saved alive."

Then the father and mother and brother of Rachel praised the God of their fathers that He had not afflicted them, and that the last of His signs and wonders had come to pass; for now they were sure that the time was at hand when He would lead them out of Egypt. But little Rachel hid her face in her mother's lap, and wept bitterly; she knew that her dear play-fellow, Pethis, was the first-born of his father, and that she would never look upon his face again.

IN THE TENTS OF ISRAEL

(A Story for Sukkot)

The desert journey had been a weary one, and many a Hebrew who had left the land of Egypt with high courage in his heart had fallen by the wayside and perished. Now Rachel, the little daughter of Simon, lay tossing with fever, while Deborah her mother knelt beside her as she bathed her burning face and hands from a cruse of water which stood on the ground at the sick child's head. From the camp came sounds of excited voices, but Deborah did not hear them. Nor did she turn when her husband pulled aside the curtain of black goat-skin, which divided the rude tent into two compartments, and stood beside her.

"Deborah," he said, speaking softly, for he dreaded waking the child who had

fallen into an uneasy sleep, "how is the little one?"

Deborah shook her head sadly, her hands smoothing the worn-out cloak which served the sick girl for both bed and covering when the night grew chill. "She has never been so ill since we came to Kadesh," she answered in the same hushed tones. "Nay, she grows weaker every day." In spite of her efforts to be brave for her husband's sake, she began to sob softly, her tears falling upon the girl's wasted hands. "Would we had remained in Egypt! We were slaves in the brick-yards of Pharaoh and worked from dawn until sunset beneath the whips of the taskmasters. But my little one was well and strong and could run and play with the other children. If she is taken from me now, I do not wish to enter the Land of Promise, which Moses our leader says lies just beyond the Jordan. If she die now, may I, too, perish and lie down to sleep in the desert beside

her." Half unconsciously she turned to pick up a small branch lying upon the ground, and began to brush away the flies that had settled upon the child's face. "Were there no graves in Egypt," she murmured rebelliously, "that he has taken us to perish in this wilderness?"

For a moment Simon was silent. He stood looking down upon her, a very man of the desert, tall and lithe and brown, his eyes keen, his face hawk-like and thin, a warrior for the Lord suddenly fashioned from a trembling bond-slave of Egypt. Yet when he spoke his voice was heavy with despair.

"Though forty days have passed, the spies have not returned," he told her hopelessly. "From every corner of the camp the people have gathered, and now they cry unto Moses our leader to deliver them from the wilderness. They, too, are weary of the desert, because they fear for the frail lives of the old men and the little

children. I dare not think of what will happen should the spies bring back evil tidings."

The mother rose suddenly from the ground, her brooding eyes fired with a new resolve. "My child is dying," she said. "Unless help comes to her, she will surely die ere sunset. I will go before Moses, for he is a man of God, and his word will drive the fever away. Stay with the child, Simon, and I will return with him."

But her husband stood between her and the goat-skin curtain, barring her way. "Nay," he told her, "Moses is not like the magicians and the star-gazers of the land of Egypt. He will use no enchantment to restore the health of our little one. Charms and incantations are evil in his eyes."

Deborah shook her head unconvinced. "Did not his word bring the plagues down upon Egypt, even the last and heaviest which slew the first-born in every house—

from the first-born of Pharaoh to the first-born of the slave that is behind the mill? Did not his rod cleave the waves, that we might walk between them with dry sandals? And afterwards did not his hand draw water from the rock? "

" But he wrought these miracles only for Israel—that we might be saved, that we might know the God of Abraham would redeem us from Egypt. Do not go before him now with our little petitions, for his heart is heavy with all the woes of Israel."

" Is the life of my child a little thing? " cried Deborah. And she pushed past him, her lips firm, her eyes bright with determination. Her husband looked after her sadly. He felt that if the little one died, the mother's heart would surely break and she would be left to lie with her child beneath the desert sands.

In the midst of the camp the folk of Israel had gathered about Moses, their leader, some sullen with the despair of

waiting, some shrill with frightened anger. For who knew, they asked among themselves, that Moses had not sent out his twelve strong men, leaders in their tribes, that they might perish in the strange countries on the Jordan and no longer rival him in the camp? So low had their fears brought them, that they dared to slander the man of God, even in his presence.

Deborah hastened through the rows of low, black tents which clustered on the edge of the boundless, tawny desert. She gazed neither to the right nor to the left, but pressed her way through the murmuring multitude, and paused not until she had stood before Moses, the man of God. For a moment her awe choked her, and she could not speak; then the thought of the white face of her child gave her strength, and new courage filled her heart.

"My little one is sick unto death," she said, "and thou canst save her."

A man in the crowd laughed scornfully. "Be silent!" he told her. "While all Israel waits to hear whether we are destined to enter the land of refuge, is it meet to speak of thy child?"

But Moses silenced him with a look. "Would I could save thy child, poor mother," he told her gently. His stern eyes grew dreamy. "For dear to me are all weak things—little children and young lambs that have never wandered from their mothers' side. Once when I was a shepherd in Midian, I found a wee lamb that had strayed from its mother, and I carried it back to the fold in my arms, even as I have sought to carry Israel across the wilderness." He raised his voice, his eyes flashing sudden fire. "And the little lamb trusted me, and was not afraid; but Israel is without faith, and will not trust his shepherd."

"And my child?" Deborah reminded him, as the crowd murmured, shamefaced

beneath his rebuke. "Canst thou save her?"

Moses did not answer. He gazed past her beyond the crowd where a group of weary-footed men struggled toward him. "They have come back," he said to himself rather than to those around him, "they have entered the Land of Promise, the land which He has given us for our own."

A cry arose from the assembly as they turned to greet the travellers. The men whom Moses had sent out from the camp, that they might explore the land into which he had prayed to lead his people, now came to their leader, foot-sore, and with dusty, tattered garments, sick for rest, yet as men who have seen great things and are afraid. Some of them carried glowing pomegranates and figs, moist and brown, such figs as the children of Israel had never seen, not even in fertile Egypt. And two of their number, Sethur the son of Michael and Geuel the son of Machi, carried a staff

from which hung a great cluster of purple grapes, bursting with wine.

The people cried aloud in their joy; here a mother embraced her son, and there a wife kissed her husband from among the twelve; for those in the camp had feared that they might never look upon their faces again. And all were mad with joy at the tempting fruits, for they knew now that the land beyond the Jordan must be a pleasant land and fertile, a land flowing with milk and honey. So, unmindful of the dangers and the struggles that still awaited them ere they took the land for their own, they raised their voices in thanksgiving, and praised God in their joy.

Deborah swayed where she stood. "My child cannot die if we are to enter the Promised Land so soon," she said, and wondered why Moses smiled at her words, though with sad eyes that seemed strangely troubled. Like one in a dream she reached out her hand, and plucked several glossy

grapes from the cluster the two men carried. Then, a strange hope in her eyes, she again forced her way through the half-mad multitude, never pausing, until she reached her child, still lying asleep, while her father fanned her with the little branch in his hand.

Her eyes brimming with tears, Deborah knelt beside the little one, and pressed the juicy grapes between her fever-parched lips. "From beyond the Jordan," she murmured happily; "so eat, my dearest one, eat, and praise God who has brought thee back to life. For, surely, the God of our fathers has heard my prayer, and thou wilt live to enter the land which He has promised unto us forever."

Little Rachel stirred, and slowly opened her eyes. She looked up into her mother's face, and tried to smile. "What pretty grapes," she whispered. "I want thee to take me where they grow, mother, that I may be well and strong again."

And her mother promised, weeping in her joy. For neither she nor Simon dreamed that without, in the camp, the children of Israel, still distrustful, murmured against God, who, because of their lack of faith, would condemn them to wander in the wilderness for many weary years ere they should enter the Land of Promise.

THE DAWN OF FREEDOM

(A Story for Rosh ha-Shanah.)

It was on the first day of the month of Tishri, the day of the blowing of the shofar. In his pleasant gardens in Jerusalem sat Micah ben Samuel, his thick hair and flowing beard as white as the flowering almond-trees which grew beside the well near by. The years had dimmed the youthful fire of his eyes and somewhat bowed his shoulders; but his voice was the voice of a young man, as he spoke to the youth standing before him.

" Hadad," said Micah, speaking kindly, his fingers playing with the long gold chain which glittered in the sunshine upon his purple robes, " Hadad, I have sent for thee to tell thee that I will redeem my promise. Hast thou forgotten it? "

Hadad, a handsome youth of seventeen, slight and graceful in his simple white gar-

ments, shook his head. "No, master," he answered. And his voice trembled a little as he spoke.

"Thou knowest that to-day is the day of the blowing of the shofar," went on Micah, "the trumpet that sounds through the land to remind us that a new year has come for the house of Israel. When it blows again in ten days, on Yom Kippur, Hadad, it will mean that all the slaves who to-day receive their freedom will be permitted to leave their masters' homes forever."

"Yes, master," answered the slave, his voice still trembling, his eyes seeking the ground.

"And thou wouldst go back to thy desert home," mused the old man, "to the tribe that sold thee into slavery! I wonder, Hadad; for here thou art free in everything but in name, less a bond-slave to me than a blood-brother to my son, Joash. Here thou livest in luxury and peace; but

thou hast told me that thy people are poor and of low estate. Surely, thy lot will not be easy when thou returnest to the tents of thy fathers."

"But I am an exile in Jerusalem," protested the boy. "I long for the ways of my brethren of the desert, for the black tents of my fathers. Yea, I would rather lie upon the sand beneath the stars and gnaw a crust of black bread, and drink miry water, than drink sweet wine from golden goblets and sleep upon an ivory couch beneath your roof;—though thou and thy son Joash have been so kind to me," he added quickly "that I have often forgotten that I was thy slave."

"We only obeyed the law of Israel," Micah told him. "Since we ourselves were once bondmen in Egypt, we are commanded to deal mercifully with our own servants and bondmen within our gates." He smiled a little, drawing the boy toward him with a kindly gesture. "It has not

been hard to obey that commandment and treat thee tenderly, Hadad. For since that day last spring-time when thou didst save my son Joash at the risk of thine own life, thou hast been little less than a son to me."

They were silent for a moment, each remembering that bright spring morning on Micah's estates in Galilee, young Joash proudly riding a great black stallion, which, taking fright, would have flung him to the ground, had not the desert lad leaped for its bridle and cowed it into submission. Then the old man placed his hand upon the boy's bowed head as though in blessing. "A son to me," he repeated. "Then it was I promised to set thee free on the day of the blowing of the shofar. And I will keep my pledge and send thee back to thy people with a purse of gold and a golden chain upon thy neck, though Joash and I will surely miss thee when thou art gone from us and we no longer look upon thy face."

As they remained thus in silence, Azariah, Micah's steward, a man as aged as himself and a servant in his household from his youth, came slowly toward them beneath the trees, his head bowed so low that his snowy beard fell beneath his girdle, his wrinkled hands beating his breast in his grief. Unconsciously Micah clutched the boy's arm and held it tightly, his face quivering and horrified from the blow he felt was about to descend. And when he spoke now, his voice was the voice of a very old man.

"Thou bringest evil tidings, Azariah!"

Azariah stood before them, his bony hands working in his beard. At first he could not speak. After a short while he said in a low tone, never raising his eyes from the ground. "A messenger has just come from thy estates in Galilee. A swift fever seized our young master Joash, and he suffered from sunrise to sunset, when he died."

A bitter cry broke from Micah's lips, for young Joash was the light of his declining years and his only child. "My son," he cried out in his intense grief, "my son!"

"I am here," whispered Hadad, his young face grown white with pity. A sudden resolution burned in his eyes, and he flung himself at his master's feet, pressing his lips to the old man's trembling hands. "Master," he pleaded, "do not send me away from thee. Thou no longer hast a son, so let me serve thee till thy death, for thou hast been as a father to me all the days that I have dwelt in thy house."

"Nay, but I did promise to set thee free," Micah reminded him, through his tears.

Then Hadad suddenly remembered a strange sight he had seen in the house of a neighbor but a few months past. A slave, desiring that he might remain in his master's household forever, had received the

" awl mark " which signified that he would never be set free. His master had led him to the door-post of the house, and with an awl had pierced a hole in the man's ear. And remembering what he had seen, Hadad made his decision.

" Thou didst not need me when thou didst promise me my freedom," he answered, " and I desired not to stay. But now only death can drive me across thy door-sill. When the trumpet blows again on the tenth day, many slaves will leave their masters' homes, rejoicing in their freedom; but I will not be among them. For thou wilt bore a hole in mine ear, and I will serve in thy house forever."

" But thy home, thy people? "

" This will be my homeland henceforth, and thou wilt continue to be a father to me. It has always grieved my heart that I could never dream of repaying thy goodness to me while I was a slave in Israel. But now

my loving service will soften thy grief a little and be a ray of light in thy darkness."

"But the sign of the awl mark," warned the steward, as Micah, having embraced the boy, sank back weeping, covering his face with his robe. "The sign of the awl mark will mean that thou wilt be a slave forever."

Hadad shook his head. "No," he reminded Azariah, proudly, "since I serve through love I am no longer a slave, and this day leads me into freedom."

THE BORROWED GARMENT

(A Story for Yom Kippur.)

It was in the golden days of Israel. The Temple in all its glorious beauty still stood upon mount Zion, and men came from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south, to marvel at its magnificence. And from the northern part of the country, from the tribe of Naphtali, came Zebulun, a mighty prince among his own people, who in his twentieth year came down to Jerusalem for the Feast of Booths which is Sukkot. But he made his journey to the city of David earlier this year than had been his custom, and reached the shining gates a few days before Yom Kippur, the day on which the Jewish maidens changed garments, one with another, and danced in the purple vineyards.

For after the solemn rites in the Temple were over, after the high priest had offered up sacrifices and had entered the holy of holies, the people of Israel, glad in the thought that their sins had been forgiven, rejoiced and made merry late into the night. It was then that the young girls donned fair garments and danced in the vineyards, singing as they moved.

All the year Shulammith had gone in mean robes with coarse sandals upon her slender feet. Her father, a wealthy merchant, had been beset by robbers while on the road to Jerusalem, despoiled of his goods, beaten, and left dying in the dust of the highway. In a few months, for often there seems to be but a step from riches to poverty, Shulammith found herself the sole support of her old mother, and toiled unceasingly at her loom from early morning until sunset, glad when evening brought her a few coins in order not to go supperless to bed. She never complained, though her

back often ached and her eyes grew dim; she even tried to sing cheerily as she coiled her hair in the grey dawn, when, fresh from sleep, she felt strong enough to begin her daily tasks once more. Perhaps she sang because she wished her old mother to think her happy even in her dire poverty. For Shulammith was too proud to complain even to herself.

But one bitter sorrow burned in the girl's heart, and gave her no rest. For one day, while drawing water from the well, she had seen her reflection in the blue mirror; and from that moment the thought of her reflected picture filled her with shame. She could not forget how beautiful she had been in the happy days before her father's death; how, in her rich robes and sparkling jewels, she had moved like a princess worthy of the praises of all who looked upon her. Now her garments were coarse and drab, since she dared not take the time from her work to weave delicate robes for

her mother and herself; her ornaments had long ago been sold to buy bread. She thought of herself as unattractive and ugly, and when she met the companions of earlier days, she longed to run away and hide, lest they mock her for her unloveliness.

She was thinking of these things one morning as she stood by the well, her pitcher poised upon her shoulder. Although she had not dared to look down upon her reflection in the watery mirror, she knew only too well how wretched she must appear in her mean dress, her face being pinched and weary. And for a moment her high courage deserted her, and she began to weep. Then she heard the sound of a step on the stone pavement beside her, and sought to dry her tears; but she was too late, for Peninnah already had her arms about her, and was trying to comfort her.

Peninnah was a few months older than Shulammith, a slight, fair girl with a faint smile and quiet voice. In the old days they had been warm friends; but as Peninnah's father was among the wealthiest men of Jerusalem, Shulammith felt that her poverty made friendship between them impossible. She now sought to slip away after a mumbled greeting, but Peninnah held her hand tightly, and forced Shulammith to sit down beside her upon the stone coping of the well.

"It is not good of thee to try to run away," she chided, "when I have not seen thee for so long. When I came to thy home thou wast so busy with thy loom, that I dared not stay for fear my chatter would disturb the weaving. Thou didst promise then to come to visit me, but thou hast never redeemed thy promise."

Shulammith, after a swift glance at her friend's silken robes and silver headband,

hung her head. "I was ashamed," she murmured at last.

"Ashamed?"

"Yes — ashamed." Her work-worn hand slipped over her dingy robes, stained from her daily household tasks. "I have no better garments. And if I should come in these, thy father's servants would think I was a beggar and would not admit me into thy presence." Again she turned to go, and again Peninnah drew her back.

"But I am the beggar," she corrected. "For I am begging a favor of thee for the sake of our old friendship. I have never dared to speak like this before, for thou hast been so cold and haughty in thy misfortunes—even to thy best friends. But when I saw thee weeping, I took courage. Let me help thee."

Shulammith's dark eyes flashed angrily. "In truth, thou art treating me like a beggar," she cried.

" No, no," pleaded her friend, " I told thee I was the one to beg for favors. I know thou art too proud to come as thou art; just to make me happy, let me give thee a few simple garments. I implore thee, Shulammith."

But Shulammith turned upon her fiercely. " Then I would indeed feel myself a beggar," she said, her lips quivering, her eyes filling with tears. She lifted her pitcher upon her shoulder. " Farewell," she cried, and left her old playmate without another word.

Peninnah followed her with her gaze, her gentle eyes soft with pity. Suddenly a faint smile played on her lips, and she clapped her hands. " She still walks like a princess," she thought fondly, as she watched the girl pass out of sight. " And she will go robed as a princess, too, for she will not dare to deny me the thing I mean to ask of her."

Rosh ha-Shanah, the day of the blowing of the shofar was over, and now came Yom Kippur. All Jerusalem, men, women, and little children, went to the Temple upon mount Zion for the holy rites. Seated beside her mother in the Women's Court, Shulammith gazed with awe upon the high priest, grave and stately, dressed in the sacred garments of that day, a coat and breeches of linen, a girdle and cap of the same material. Placing his hands upon the head of a young bull, he offered up the animal in the name of his own family. He prayed also for his fellow-priests in Israel; then sprinkled the purifying blood of the slain animal about the holy of holies, that compartment in the Temple into which no man might pass save the high priest, and he only on the Day of Atonement. Two goats had been brought before him, one chosen by lot as a sin-offering for the Lord, the other to be sent away into the wilderness. Now the high priest slew

the goat set apart for the Lord, and with its blood also purified the holy of holies, in case it became defiled during the year. Then the live goat was brought forward. Following the ancient custom, the high priest confessed the sins of all Israel, prayed that the animal be the "sin-offering" for the transgressions of the nation, and sent it forth to be driven out into the hills and the waste places that lay beyond Jerusalem. More sacrifices followed. At last the high priest brought forth the censer he had carried into the holy of holies; the lamps were lighted, and fresh incense burned. Slowly the heavy clouds of smoke rose from the golden altar: the Day of Atonement was over.

Shulammith, her mother leaning on her arm, walked slowly to their humble house, her eyes seeking the ground as they passed old friends and neighbors. Among the other women in their festal garments, she felt degraded, being clad in the coarse

robes she had washed and pressed for the holy day. So bitter had she grown, that when any one spoke kindly to her, she imagined that they thought only of her mean apparel and mocked her in their hearts, or at least pitied her; and this hurt most of all. But she said not a word of this to her old mother.

And when they came into their house, the two women cried out in astonishment, for upon the bed lay a rare robe of shimmering white, shot with silver threads, a robe fit for a mighty queen to wear on her bridal day. Upon the table stood a carved casket. It was open, and a necklace of milky pearls flowed forth from it. Shulammith's mother walked up slowly to the table, and lifted the pearls with trembling fingers; but the girl did not stir. She gazed upon the robe and the casket and the pearls, that lay beside it, with widening eyes like one in a dream. Then she started, as a low laugh was heard from

a corner of the room, and Peninnah came forward, her eyes smiling with merriment. "Did I frighten thee, dear one?" she asked. "Come, hasten, and put on these robes, and let me bind the pearls about thy hair, for it grows late."

"I cannot take thy gift," began Shulammith, speaking harshly in her pride.

But Peninnah only laughed more merrily than before. "Didst thou think that I would let thee escape our dance in the vineyard?" she smiled, her eager fingers busy among Shulammith's thick curls. "Last year we were close friends; thou wast my partner. And this year I will not go without thee."

Then Shulammith remembered how on Yom Kippur but a year ago she had exchanged her fairest garments with a poor maiden and had danced happily in the girl's simple robes. And her cheeks flushed with shame as she thought of her rude refusal of Peninnah's kindness.

"I will joyfully exchange garments with thee," she faltered, "but these I wear are my best, and they are too mean for thee."

"But I will be glad to wear them," answered Peninnah, "and thou wilt plait my hair as thou wast wont to do; and we will dance together. Perhaps," and she pinched her friend's cheek mischievously, "perhaps, thy dress will become me so well that some great prince who sees us dance will seek my hand in marriage; while thou in these rich garments may fail to win his favor."

"That is often true," commented Shulammith's mother, nodding wisely. "And it was for that reason that the dance in the vineyards was planned. For we are to remember not to praise a maiden for her beauty or her fair raiment, but for her modesty and for virtue; and on this day the rich maiden cannot rely upon her ornaments or her silken robes."

So the two maidens went to the vineyards together, and danced with the others to the music of the flute and harp. And as they danced they sang the old song of Yom Kippur to the young men who danced beside them.

O young man, lift up thine eyes,
And look before thou choosest;
Look not for beauty,
But seek for good breeding:
False is grace and beauty is vain:
A God-fearing woman is alone worthy of praise.

And Zebulun of the tribe of Naphtali, a mighty prince among his own people, was one of those who saw the maidens dance and heard them sing. Whether it was because of her proud beauty, enhanced by her borrowed garments, or whether he had heard of her tender care of her mother, I know not; but seeing Shulammith, he loved her and desired her for his bride. Therefore, when the Festival of the Booths, which is Sukkot, was over, and he returned to his home, he took her with him as his

wife, back to his own people; and her mother he took also, and was a son to her in her old age. Thus they journeyed up from Jerusalem together, and Shulammith wore a robe of white, shot with silver threads, and her dark curls were bound with a fillet of pearls white as milk. For Peninnah, whose heart was overjoyed at her friend's good fortune, had bidden her keep the festal robe for her bridal day, holding in exchange the coarse garments she herself had worn when the maidens of Israel had danced in the purple vineyards, singing as they moved.

THE LAD WHO BROUGHT NO OFFERING

(A Story for Shabu'ot.)

And Ephraim was to go up to Jerusalem alone!

As he journeyed along the road leading to the city upon the hills, he felt not a little proud. For he was only a young lad, scarcely fourteen, and this was the first time he was journeying to the Temple without his father. Ephraim's father had had great riches; but little by little his vast estate had grown smaller, until there had been left only a few miserable acres. He had been forced to dismiss his many men-servants and handmaidens one after another. Year by year the retinue that followed him to the Temple on the three great festivals had grown smaller and smaller, until on Passover there had been only one man-servant, and he a bond-slave

with the awl mark in his ear, to follow Ephraim's parents as they went up to Jerusalem with their humble offerings in their hands.

And after the feast of Passover a cruel plague had swept the land, and Ephraim's mother was dead, and the bond-servant was free from his master. Nor had Ephraim's father, who was also sorely stricken, even yet recovered his strength. As the feast of the first-fruits drew nigh, he realized that he would not be able to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

" My son," he said, calling the lad to his bed, " thou must go up to Jerusalem alone and take the offerings of the first-fruits, for of all our house none but thee remains to go up to the Temple of the Lord. Thou wast but a little child then, and cannot remember how my men-servants and maid-servants followed me and thy mother, singing and rejoicing, and bearing bounteous offerings to lay upon the altar. To-day I

am a broken man, and my fields are well-nigh barren. But the God of Israel will not reject the offerings of a humble and a grateful heart. Much has He taken away that He gave in the days of my gladness; yet must I rejoice, for He has let me know that through thee, my son, my name shall not perish in Israel."

Then he bade Ephraim gather the best of the fruits that their fields had yielded them, and with his trembling hands he arranged the fruits in a basket and covered them with long, damp leaves, lest the sun's rays should do them harm. And Ephraim kissed his father who blessed him; and the lad departed and went his way toward Jerusalem.

At last he saw the towers of the city of David, and his heart sang for joy. He stopped to rest for a moment, and smiled as his eyes wandered over the country-side radiant with the many-hued lilies of the field, the dew still sparkling upon their

petals. Birds sang on every tree, and, hidden by the long grass, a little brook gurgled and laughed and rejoiced, as though it, too, were glad and wished to praise God for His goodness. Suddenly joy died out of the heart of Ephraim, and a sickening dread took its place, for he saw a strange, ragged figure approaching from among the trees, and even before he heard the man's cry: "Unclean! Unclean!" he knew him to be a leper, a man terribly smitten and doomed to pass the rest of his days apart from his fellow-men. The leper was frightful to look upon, and Ephraim would have hurried by, had he not cried appealingly: "Nay, pause but a moment, for I will do thee no harm, neither will I draw nearer lest I defile thy garments."

So Ephraim paused by the road-side to listen.

"My son," said the leper, "all day have I hidden among the trees and watched the happy pilgrims journey to Jerusalem. And

my heart was heavy, for by reason of my affliction I am shut off not only from the sons of men, but even from the House of God. For the last three years I have watched the people of Israel journey to Jerusalem, bringing the first-fruits of their fields with them. And my heart well-nigh broke because I could not lay my offerings before Him. But now when I saw thee pass, I said: 'It is but a young lad, and he may take compassion upon me and grant me the thing my soul desires.'"

"But I can do nought for thee," answered Ephraim, and his eyes filled with tears of pity. "I may not even touch thy hand, for such, as thou knowest, is the law in Israel."

"My son," the leper made answer, "It is but a little thing that I ask. My heart has grieved these many months that I can lay no offerings upon the altar of my God. But last night I had a strange dream. I thought I wandered in the wilderness, and

God spoke to me, saying: 'My child, why hast thou brought Me no offerings these many days? Is thy heart so bitter by reason of thy affliction, that thou grudgest Me the first-fruits I have bidden thee to lay upon My altar?' and I answered: 'Nay, my Lord, but since I am forbidden to enter the Temple, I cannot bring my offerings with the others.' He answered: 'My child, if thy heart craves to serve Me, I will sanctify the spot where thou seest My face. To-morrow bring the first-fruits as an offering, and they will be acceptable unto Me.' Then I awoke, and knew that I had heard the voice of the Lord."

"Yea," answered Ephraim, and he trembled a little.

"Wilt thou not give me thy basket of the first-fruits, that I may go into the wilderness and lay them upon an altar I have reared of stone and of the branches of the trees? For the Lord will be pleased with

my offering, even though I must not appear before Him in His holy temple."

"But I cannot go before the altar with empty hands," said Ephraim. "See, this small basket is all I have, and even that thou wouldst take from me."

"For three years," repeated the leper, "I have not brought Him offerings, and now thou wouldst have me leave my altar barren and empty."

Hardly knowing why he acted thus, Ephraim placed his basket beside the road, for he knew that he must not allow the leper to approach him. "Take the offering of my first-fruits," he said, "and may they be acceptable unto Him."

"The Lord bless thee all the days of thy life," answered the leper, as he seized the basket and ran quickly away.

Then Ephraim continued on his way to Jerusalem, and as he went, his heart was heavy because he must put his father's house to shame by appearing before the

altar with empty hands. His cheeks burned, and with downcast eyes he stood before the priest and stammeringly began to explain why he had failed to bring his offerings.

But the gentle old man laid his hand upon the boy's shoulder, and would not let him continue. "I do not understand thy story, my son," he said gravely, "but I know that the Lord has been with thee."

Then Ephraim realized that he was holding a basket of luscious fruits in his hands, and around the basket were twined splendid lilies of the field with the dew still clinging to their petals. And as Ephraim placed his offering upon the altar, he knew that the Lord was indeed with him; and his heart sang for joy.

THE SILENT HARP

(A Story for Tish'ah be-Ab.)

I

It was nearly dawn when little Reuben awoke, and shivered as he lay beside his mother. Rising softly, for he feared to disturb her, he picked up his harp, and walked away to the little brook that trickled by the wayside where he bathed his dusty face and lapped the refreshing water from his cupped hand.

For a moment he stood gazing down upon his sleeping fellow-captives, driven from the land of Israel to Babylon as exiles; then he turned his face toward the ruins which had been Jerusalem. Against the pink-streaked sky he could see the last wall of the Temple, black and terrible—the Temple in which he had once hoped to play some day; for even at the age of nine he was a skilled harpist. His father and

his brothers had been slaughtered upon the very floor of that Temple—that much he had learned from the frantic wailing of his mother. But no one would tell him the secret horror of their deaths. His mother, with little Miriam at her breast, and Reuben clinging to her hand, had been driven forth from the black ruins which they had once called their home. In their flight Reuben had snatched his precious harp, the harp he had often played on summer evenings beneath the fig-trees which grew before their house. As the child remembered the white doves that had built their nests in the long leaves and have never failed to flutter down to his shoulders at his call, he threw himself upon the ground, weeping bitterly, his wet cheeks pressed against the harp strings.

His sobs awoke several women and children about him, and they joined in his lamentations. As they wept, an old white-haired man, leaning upon a staff, made his

way toward them. He drew little Reuben to his side, and rested his trembling hand upon the lad's curly head.

"Is there no hope for Zion?" cried the exiles. "Tell us, Jeremiah! Shall we never return to the land of our birth?"

The old man did not answer. He only stared with tearless eyes toward the blackened western wall of the Temple standing out against the crimson clouds.

Little Reuben felt a strange desire to comfort him. He tugged at the prophet's robe, and showed him his harp.

"Some day," said little Reuben proudly, "we will come back to Jerusalem, and we will build a new Temple, and I will bring my harp into the Temple and play upon it forever."

II

The rays of the noonday sun beat upon the bowed heads of the wretched captives as they staggered along the dusty roads

towards Babylon. Little Reuben, his harp still pressed to his breast, limped wearily beside his mother. Sometimes he glanced timidly into her face; then he became afraid. . . . . Could this white-faced woman, who looked straight into the distance and never answered him when he spoke to her, be his own mother? Every evening, when the Babylonian guard gave them bread, she would wait until Reuben had devoured his scanty meal; then she would push her portion into his hands. Sometimes he broke off a morsel and pressed it between her lips, but she would only shake her head in silence.

One morning, when they were ready to start on their day's journey, Reuben noticed that his mother's arms were empty. She no longer carried the tiny baby sister, who for the last few days had been strangely quiet and had neither fretted nor cried.

"Where is Miriam?" Reuben asked his mother. "Have the soldiers taken her

in the night?" But his mother did not answer. She only rocked to and fro in her grief, and held her empty arms as though the baby still slept upon her breast. And when Reuben lay down to sleep beneath the stars that night, he cried bitterly, and laid his face against his harp as he wondered whether the soldiers would take that away from him, too.

When the sun's rays fell upon his face, he awoke. He tried to arouse his mother, but she did not stir. Marah, a kindly woman, who had once been their neighbor, drew him gently away, and, even before she spoke, Reuben realized that he was alone in the world.

* * * * *

Several days later Nebuzaradan, the general of the hosts of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, rode down the ranks of the broken, straggling captives. He sat upon his great black horse like a very king,

and carried his head proudly; yet his face beneath the gold-wrought helmet was worn and white and strangely terrified, like the face of a man who awakes from an evil dream.

"Why does he look so sad?" Reuben asked Marah in wonder. "When he returns to Nebuchadnezzar as a conqueror, the king will load him with wealth and honors."

"Surely, thou hast heard the cause of his heaviness of spirit," interrupted Marah's son, Daniel, a stripling of sixteen. "Thy father and . . . ."

"Hush, Daniel!" cried Marah, drawing Reuben to her. "Why frighten the lad? Say no more!"

Daniel was silent; but that night Reuben, who lay beside him, crept closer, whispering: "Daniel, tell me, I pray thee, how my father and thy father died. My mother would not tell me, and thy mother thought I would be frightened; but I am

almost a man now, so tell me how they met their death."

"When Nebuzaradan, the general, entered the courts of the Temple," began Daniel, speaking softly, lest he awaken the sleepers about him, "he saw a pool of blood boiling and seething upon the floor. He had our priests brought before him to tell him the meaning of this thing; but they feared to tell him the truth of the matter, and answered: 'It is only the blood of the sacrifices, lambs and oxen we have slaughtered upon the altar of the Lord.' But the pool of blood continued to seethe, and Nebuzaradan then cried: 'Ye are lying, priests! Speak truly, or I will tear the flesh from your bodies!' And the priests confessed that it was the blood of the prophet Zechariah whom the people of Jerusalem had slain in that very place for declaring that the Temple would be destroyed. 'Then I will cause this blood which cries for vengeance to be satisfied,'

declared Nebuzaradan, and he ordered the scholars, among them thy father and mine, to be slain in that place. . . . . But the blood upon the floor would not rest. Many maidens and youths were also slain—among them thy brothers—even the young priests were not spared; but still the blood of Zechariah continued to boil and seethe upon the Temple floor. But at last Nebuzaradan cried out: 'Zechariah! Zechariah! See how I have slaughtered the most precious souls in all Israel. Dost thou demand still more destruction? Must I slay a whole people?' Then the blood became quiet; but Nebuzaradan trembled where he stood and said: 'If the death of this one man was counted such a sin in the eyes of the God of Israel, how can I, the slayer of hundreds, ever hope for peace?' And since that day no man has seen him smile, and I have heard it whispered that, when he returns to Babylon, he will lay his sword at the feet of

Nebuchadnezzar, his king, and seek to learn the faith of our people, that he may become one of us and be at peace."

"I am glad he is tormented for his cruelty," muttered Reuben. "To-day he seemed like another king Saul, tortured by an evil spirit."

"Wouldst thou, like another David, drive away his moodiness with thy harp?" asked Daniel, half in mockery.

"Nay," returned the younger lad fiercely. "How could I bring myself to restore peace to the destroyer of our nation?"

III

In the banquet hall of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon there rose shouts of boisterous laughter, mingling with the softer voices of slave girls, who sang as they poured out the wine. At the king's right hand sat Nebuzaradan, his face pale and gloomy beneath the jewelled circlet which his royal master had placed about his

brows. But the eyes of Nebuchadnezzar the king glowed with pride, as he looked upon the captives from Jerusalem, passing before him with gifts of tribute in their hands, even the gold and silver vessels from their ravaged Temple. Past the royal seat they came, the elders and the young men, women with babes at their breast, priests and little children. And one little lad, weary and foot-sore, staggered and fell exhausted before the king's feet. One of the huge black slaves, who stood behind the king, raised little Reuben roughly, and he would have passed on, had not the king detained him with a gesture.

"What doth the lad carry?" he asked curiously, his eyes falling upon the harp whose strings the child had covered with long green leaves to keep them from breaking with the heat.

"A harp, my lord the king," answered Nebuzaradan. "There are skilled harp players among the Hebrews."

"And thou hast brought this petty thing for tribute?" asked Nebuchadnezzar the king, his small eyes twinkling with amusement. He laughed as the little exile hugged the harp closer to his breast. "It must be a rare instrument, since thou hast treasured it, and sought to bring it safely from Jerusalem even unto Babylon!"

"It was my father's harp," answered Reuben, so low that the king could hardly catch his words.

"And he taught thee to play?" asked the king. Reuben nodded. "It is well!" said Nebuchadnezzar, and signed to his guards to stay the line of captives. "Thou art a comely boy—if thou dost play sweetly, thou shalt have a place among our own musicians. Play for us now, and sing one of the songs of Zion."

Reuben's fingers tightened about his beloved harp, while his frightened eyes glanced from the line of weary captives to the cold, unhappy face of the butcher of

Babylon, who sat at the king's right hand. He grew very white, and trembled in every limb as he slowly shook his head.

"Will they kill me?" he wondered as he saw the king's countenance darken with wrath. He spoke, and his voice sounded in his ears like the voice of another speaker: "I cannot play my harp in a foreign land, nor will I sing the songs of Zion before the enemies of my people."

A cry, half of joy, half of pity, burst from the captives. But no one heeded them, for those of the court, dumb with surprise, stared at the mighty king of Babylon, defied by a little child. There was a long silence; then Nebuchadnezzar laughed softly, as he gazed upon Reuben standing before him with fumbling hands and bowed head. He turned to one of his slaves, and gave a low, sharp command.

"Surely, they will kill me," thought Reuben, and he closed his eyes and waited in the dreadful silence.

"Now take thy harp and sing one of the songs of Zion," commanded Nebuchadnezzar once more, and looking up, Reuben saw that the black slave had returned. In spite of himself, the boy cringed, as his frightened eyes fell upon the heavy whip the slave carried. He would never be strong enough to withstand their torments, for he was only a little lad . . . . and weak . . . . and very, very tired.

He cowered back against the banquet table, and, as he clung to it for support, his hand touched a long knife. As he felt the cold steel beneath his fingers, a thought flashed through his tired brain. If—if he dared to escape in this dreadful way, even a hundred lashes could never force him to string his harp again.

He caught up the knife in one hand, and stretched the other beneath it. A moment later the shining blade descended, and the child lurched forward, crying out in agony, his fingers hacked and bleeding.

After his long terror, the frightful pain was too much to be borne, and he fell fainting to the ground. Even as the darkness closed over him, he heard his harp strike the marble pavement; and, as the cords snapped, Reuben's heart broke within him, and he longed for death.

"A strange and stubborn people—even their little children defy me!" mused Nebuchadnezzar. He turned to Nebuzaradan: "But thou didst break them, my general! More praise to thee that thou didst break them!"

In answer to the king's words, the conqueror of Jerusalem raised his jewelled arm in salute—but his body trembled, and his smiling lips were white.

THE SPRIG OF MYRTLE

(A Story for Purim.)

A group of girls danced and played merrily before the house of Mordecai the Jew. Their happy laughter came to him as he sat before his door watching their sport, his grave eyes growing strangely wistful as they followed the slight figure of his ward, Hadassah, whose gay, teasing laughter rang out above the rest. Just seventeen was Hadassah, flower-faced and light of foot, her long dark hair bound with a wreath of the fragrant myrtle whose name she bore. And Mordecai, in whose house she had grown from infancy, looked upon her as his own child, and grew unhappy at the thought of losing her forever.

Even as the maidens danced and frolicked, a youth, dressed in the blue and white liveries of the king's household,

entered the court-yard before Mordecai's house. He carried a scroll bound with the royal colors from which dangled the seal of the king's authority. Mordecai's heart sank as the youth approached. He knew only too well that Vashti, the beautiful wife of King Ahasuerus, had been divorced and that now the king sought among the maidens of Persia for her successor.

"I come from the king," began the stranger, touching the seal of his proclamation as Mordecai saluted him respectfully.

"I understand," answered the Jew. "Thou wilt take my ward, Hadassah away?"

"Within two hours let her be ready to depart for the king's palace. And those with her?"

"The daughters of our neighbors."

"I shall go to their households that they may be summoned likewise. Take care that the maid Hadassah is ready to journey with them. And remember, from this day

forth, thou hast no child, for she is of the king's household."

"I understand," repeated Mordecai, his eyes dark with pain. "Hadassah," he called, and smiled sadly to see how the girl hurried to him, ever obedient to his summons. "Come into the house, beloved, for I would speak with thee." And she followed him across the door-sill.

Calling the old tire-woman who had been Hadassah's nurse, Mordecai bade her bring fresh robes for the girl and prepare her for her journey. "The king's command," he murmured sorrowfully as he sat apart, his chin resting upon his hand. "My Hadassah, my myrtle flower, torn from her native soil to wither in the courtyards of his golden house."

Presently Hadassah came to him, even fairer than before in her festive robes of pale green, a fresh wreath of her name flower about her hair. The old nurse gazed upon her with fond pride. "She

will be the loveliest maiden among all those who stand before the king," she murmured, as she smoothed the maiden's glossy curls. "But she is dressed far too simply for a daughter of the house of Benjamin. I pray thee, master, give me the casket of jewels her mother wore upon her bridal day, the topaz for her arms and neck, and the golden anklets and girdle."

Hadassah's eyes sparkled with delight; but Mordecai shook his head. "Nay, she is fairer thus; she has never worn jewels, nor must she wear them to-day." Then, as the old servant withdrew frowning, carrying the discarded robes with her, he drew the young girl to his side and kissed her. "Do not fret, little one," he comforted. "And do not blame me if I do not care to deck thee, a true Jewish daughter, in the gauds of a Persian princess. For I would have thee appear among the beauties of the king's court like a modest flower that by thy very simplicity and

sweetness thou mayest win his royal favor."

Hadassah stared at her cousin with unbelieving eyes. "But, surely, thou dost not wish me to remain in the king's palace," she protested. "Thou wouldst not have him select me for his bride?"

Mordecai answered her slowly: "Hadassah—little one, how can I tell thee? It almost breaks my heart to give thee up, to send thee among strangers. Yet I am glad, very glad, to see thee go. For who knows, perhaps, thou mayest find favor in the king's eyes and a day may come when thine innocence and beauty will win great comfort for our exiled people. We are strangers here in Persia, little daughter, and a sword is ever above our heads. But who knows but that thou mayest become a star of hope to our brethren in time of need—yea, Esther, which in their tongue signifies a star of good fortune, shall be thy name," he murmured more to himself than

to the girl who stared at him with frightened, puzzled eyes. Then, catching the look of terror on her face, he drew her to him, and kissed her tenderly. "Did I frighten thee? Be not afraid, sweet one, for the God of our fathers will watch over thee wherever thou goest. And my prayers must follow thee past the pillars of the king's golden house." He held her at arm's length, and spoke even more earnestly: "I lay only one command upon thee—heed it well. Until I bid thee speak, tell no one of thy kindred and thy race. Promise me, Hadassah, that thou wilt obey me in this!"

She raised troubled eyes to his face. "Thou hast always taught me to be proud that I am the daughter of our people," she began doubtfully.

"True! But now none must know that thou art of Jewish blood. Trust me in this, my little one, and obey me, even as I hope to see thee obey me in greater things,

shouldst thou ever be called upon to serve our people."

"I will always obey thee," promised the girl; "no matter how far away I dwell, no matter how rich and honored I may become—even if I am crowned queen of Persia."

* * * * *

Before the palace of the king at Shushan several boys of the royal household played at ball. A youth taller than the rest, and carrying himself with a certain grave dignity, came from the palace, and stood upon the shining marble steps to watch them. His eyes brightened, and, throwing aside his mantle heavily embroidered with gold, he joined the game, laughing as merrily as the rest when his golden ball sped across the rose-bushes into the depths of a lily-bordered pool. A roguish, blue-eyed lad had already started to strip off his light garment, that he might dive after it, when he who had flung the ball shook his head.

"Nay, Myrion," he cried. "On such a glorious day why seek for gold baubles? Within," his hand indicated the palace, "there is too much gold and heavy incense and bowing of black slaves. Let us spend the day in the forest with our bows and arrows." Impatiently he waved aside the slave who held his discarded mantle. "I will go like the others," he declared willfully, "and run and leap unhampered by my foolish robes. Bring me my bow and arrows—I am eager to be off."

His companions followed him gladly through the green, cool ways of the forest. It was spring-time; they were young and free from care, and the songs of the birds on every bough seemed to echo the joy in their youthful hearts. The tall youth laughed and jested with the others, but soon his brow darkened petulantly, for no game had appeared to be brought down and stowed in the bags the dark-skinned attendants carried upon their shoulders. But at

last, as they came to a clearing in the woods, Ittar, a keen-faced, slight lad, cried excitedly: "A bird—see, it is rising—toward the east!"

The others waited as the tall youth fitted his arrow to his bow, took a steady aim, and let it speed upward toward the fluttering wings already fading against the shining blue of the morning sky. The boys burst into a shout of triumph as the tiny mass of feathers poised a moment above them, then dropped down, the arrow which had struck its wing falling before it. One of the attendants darted forward eagerly to secure the prize; but the bird seemed to have fallen out of sight into a clump of bushes, and he returned empty-handed.

The lad whose arrow had brought the victim to earth flushed with disappointment and anger. He half raised his hand as though to strike the slave who cringed before him. "Must I return with empty

bags because of thy blindness?" he cried furiously.

Even as he spoke, there appeared from the thicket the royal messenger, followed by a group of maidens in festal robes, with jewels in their flowing hair. One walked apart from her companions, a girl in simple garments, crowned with myrtle, her face bent tenderly over a mass of feathers she held gathered to her breast. The messenger started forward, was about to sink to the ground as though a great personage had stood before him, but the tall youth restrained him with a swift gesture. He walked quickly to the flower-crowned girl, and held out his hand.

"The dove thou carriest is mine," he told her. "My arrow just brought it to earth. Give it to me."

She raised her eyes, serious but unabashed as a little child. "I have just picked it up from the ground where it lay wounded and suffering. See, thou hast broken its

poor wing. But, perhaps, with tender care it will heal again. May I not take it to keep me company in my loneliness in the king's palace?"

The other smiled. "Surely, maiden, thou wilt not be lonely in the king's golden house, with its couches of ivory and silver and its crystal goblets set with jewels like altar-fires."

"I will miss the roses and the myrtles of my garden," she answered, "and my doves which came to eat from my hand in the morning and at night. Let me, I pray thee, keep this dove to remind me of my home."

"But since my arrow brought it low, I would have some small trophy of my triumph. Give me, maiden, a spray of the sweet-smelling myrtle that binds thy hair."

Smiling shyly, the girl broke a spray of her name flower from the wreath about her head, and placed it in his outstretched hand. She was about to pass him and join

the others, when he caught her robe. "Thy name, maiden?" he demanded.

"In the tongue of the Hebrews (she was about to say: "my people," but restrained herself in time) my name is Hadassah, or myrtle. But the Persians will call me Esther, or a star of good fortune."

"Flower and star," murmured the youth as she left him, "modest sweetness and good fortune! Have I found them at last to bring me trust and comfort?" With an imperious gesture, he called the messenger to his side. "Thou hast not seen me to-day," he commanded sharply. "And when thou reachest the palace, speak at once to Hegai, telling him that the maiden Esther with whom I have just spoken is to be treated as royally as a daughter of the king's household." The messenger bowed and returned to the girls who now stood about Hadassah, twittering with excitement as they sought to learn of her conversation with the stranger.

She only shook her head, with her faint, grave smile. "He spoke graciously to me and permitted me to keep the dove," was all she said as she stroked the soft feathers huddled against her breast. But on the way to the king's house she smiled mysteriously more than once as though a beautiful secret had been whispered to her in the forest under the shining morning sky.

And now it seemed to Hadassah, whom her Persian companions in the women's apartments of the king's palace called Esther, as though cool forests and shining skies were things far off, like half-forgotten dreams. In the king's house it was hard to breathe freely; she seemed to droop beneath a stifling heat, though cool fountains played in the marble court-yards and dusky-skinned slaves waved great fans of peacock feathers above her as she slept. Sometimes, as she looked at her dove in the gilded wicker cage which Hegai, the keeper of the women's apartments, had

brought her, she thought how they were indeed sisters in misfortune, lonely in a beautiful prison-house, far away from home and kindred.

"But do not grieve, dear dove," she would murmur, "for it is only for a little while. We are prisoners now; but some day, when the new queen is chosen, I will go back to dear Mordecai—and on that day I will set thee free. It will be good to go back to my garden with its roses and its myrtles," she said with a far-away look in her eyes; yet she sighed a little, too, for she felt certain that the youth she had met in the forest was of the court, and she knew that if she left the king's house she might never look upon the stranger's face again.

There came a day when from early morning until the time of torches the women's apartments of the king's golden house resounded with excited murmurs, as the fairest maidens, gathered from every corner of the kingdom, made themselves

ready to appear before the king that he might choose his royal bride. "Who will be chosen?" they asked themselves, as they splashed luxuriously in the marble baths or anointed themselves with fragrant oils before donning their festive robes and anklets and diadems. A few of the favorites of Hegai, Esther among them, were offered richer ornaments than their mates. But the ward of Mordecai would have none of the milky pearls and strings of rubies that the keeper of the women's apartments tried to press upon her.

"I will wear no jewels," she declared firmly, "and no other robe than that in which I left my guardian's house." So Hegai, wondering and protesting, yielded to her whim, never dreaming that the girl hoped to escape unnoticed in her modest attire that she might be permitted to leave the bleak magnificence of the king's golden house.

At last the maidens passed in slow procession down the lane of negro slaves bearing flaming torches, down through the gardens about the women's pavilions and into the great hall, where King Ahasuerus of Persia and his glittering court awaited them. One by one they moved slowly before him, every girl as beautiful as a flower; stately, dark maidens, like queen roses in their pride, lily-white virgins with hair gleaming like pale gold in the torchlight. The great hall was silent with expectancy; no one stirred or even seemed to breathe.

Ahasuerus, in his robes of royal blue and white, sat motionless as an ivory statue, his keen eyes eagerly scanning the faces of the girls who passed before him, pausing only long enough to prostrate themselves at his feet until he waved his command to follow the others. Suddenly he leaped forward, his face aglow, his hand extended to the girl who bent before him, a slender, dark

girl in simple robes, her long hair bound with a wreath of myrtle flowers.

Ahasuerus descended from the dais on which he sat, and raised the girl to her feet; their eyes met, and those who stood near saw her grow pale, then flush rosily beneath the king's gaze.

"Thou," was all she could stammer, "thou art the king?"

From his girdle Ahasuerus drew a sprig of withered myrtle, and placed it in her hand.

"I am glad thou didst wear the myrtle wreath to-night, beloved," he told her, "for to-morrow thou must lay it aside when I place the crown of Persia upon thy head and proclaim thee my wife and queen."

* * * * *

Amid the shrubs and flowering bushes, which surrounded the queen's pavilion, Mordecai the Jew crouched and waited through the long night. The decree had gone forth dooming every Jew in Persia

to destruction. Mordecai with his brethren had prayed and fasted; now he waited with clasped hands and trembling lips, his eyes fixed upon the lamp burning in the queen's tower window.

For the lamp was to be the signal to Mordecai that he might tell his brethren, the queen's own people, whether they were to be spared, or doomed to fall beneath Haman's hatred. Haman, favorite of the king, had won his permission to slay the people of Mordecai whom he hated with the bitterness of death. It was then that Mordecai sought Esther for the first time since her crowning, bidding her plead with her husband, the king, that her people be spared from destruction. Esther had hesitated; to appear before the king unsummoned meant certain death, unless the monarch's heart should be moved by pity and his extended sceptre proclaim pardon for the intruder. And for many days Ahasuerus had not summoned his queen to

appear before him. But Mordecai's words moved Esther to dare all for her people.

"If I perish, I perish," she told him, seeking to obey her guardian unfalteringly as in the old days when she had played with her companions before his humble home, far away from the golden glories of the king's palace.

And so, splendid in her royal robes and jewels, wearing not the crown of Persia upon her head but only a wreath of myrtle flowers, Esther appeared before her lord. He pardoned her presumption, and extended his sceptre of mercy to the trembling girl. Her petition was upon her lips; she longed to plead with him to spare her people, the people of Mordecai she had not dared before to claim as her kindred. But, fearful and confused, struggling like a dove in the fowler's net, she had played for time, pleading that her husband and Haman should grace a banquet she would prepare for them in her private apartments.

" And there will I plead our cause before the king," she had assured Mordecai. " I will declare myself a Jewess, and he must spare our people for my sake." Her eyes turned to the white dove in its gilded cage upon her window ledge. " Poor prisoner," she murmured, " I have not given it its freedom, though I am free now, since the king's love has changed the palace from a prison to a house of gladness." She turned back to Mordecai. " Wait below in the gardens to-night. Hegai is still my friend, and will admit thee. I will send thee a sign that thou mayest know whether we of Israel are to live or die. If I quench the light in the golden lamp swinging in my casement, thou wilt know that the light of life is quenched for us and for our brethren. Then return to our people, and prepare them for death, and count me also among the dead. But if the king is gracious to me and vows to spare our nation, I will free my dove as a token of deliverance." She

clasped her hands upon her breast, and stood before Mordecai very quiet and of good courage. "I will plead for our people to-night," she promised. "The God of our fathers grant that I prove a star of deliverance to them in their dire need."

And even now she must be with the king, for Mordecai had seen the royal party enter the queen's pavilion shortly after sunset. Now the moon had risen, silvering the shrubs and fountains. A peaceful and a lovely night, yet Mordecai's soul was sick with horror. If she should fail—he saw the Jews of Persia delivered to the sword: men, women, even little children, crushed beneath the cruelty of Haman's vengeance. And Hadassah—his Hadassah—if she declared herself a Jewess, she, too, would be among the slain. Even now the king's guards might be leading her from his presence to die an ignoble death. . . . .

Suddenly the light in Esther's tower window darkened. Mordecai swayed where he stood, his hands clutching at his throat. Then he understood. A woman was leaning from the window, her slight figure blotting out the light. In the moon's rays he saw her press a white object to her lips, kissing her dove before she set it free. Stretching its wings, the happy creature flew above the flowers back to the forest, far away from the king's golden house. In the queen's pavilion stern-faced guards led Haman forth to die, and Ahasuerus granted life to Esther and her kindred. Beneath the window among the silvered shrubs and fountains, Mordecai bent before the God of his fathers in grateful prayer. And as he prayed he wept.

FRIENDS

(A Story for Hanukkah.)

When young Beriah set out upon his journey to Antioch to join his father, lately appointed an officer in the household of Antiochus of Syria, Judas walked with him to the turn in the road, loath to have Beriah depart, for they were dear friends and this was to be their first parting.

"Would that thou wert coming with me to Antioch," mourned Beriah. "Thou wilt be as one buried alive in little Modin, while in the splendid court of Antiochus—"

"He who would teach pious Jews to enjoy the shameful feasts and games of the heathen!" interrupted Judas. "Better that thou shouldst stay in Modin than follow the example of our brethren of Antioch, who ape the manners and dress of the Greek and the language of the Gentile."

Beriah shrugged impatiently. "Why should we not wear the Greek dress and enjoy the Greek games?" he asked lightly.

"If we follow the Greeks in lesser things," Judas answered, "our people will soon forget to worship the God of our fathers. Hast thou not heard that this Antiochus seeks to introduce the worship of his heathen gods among us?"

"And if he should succeed!" There was a hint of mockery in Beriah's voice. "What does it matter whether we pay our vows to the 'God of our fathers', or bow before the ivy-crowned Bacchus these Syrians worship?"

"This is blasphemy!" cried Judas, and his face grew hard and white.

But Beriah laughed gayly, and threw a caressing arm about his friend's shoulder. "I did but wish to torment thee," he insisted. "Yet thou knowest how I have always shared the Greek's joy in the sunshine and color of life, joy in the swiftness

of the runner in his gymnasium, joy in the marble images of his beautiful gods. All this I shall have at Antioch." Suddenly his merry face grew grave. "But I shall miss thee, my Judas," he murmured.

"Yea," answered Judas, and he could say no more.

They had reached the turn in the road, where for a long time they stood in silence. An evening wind stirred the leaves of the trees; there was no sound but the faint, sleepy chirping of birds. In the years to come Judas could never remember that peaceful sunset without a throb of pain. Beriah was the first to speak, and his voice trembled a little.

"Some day, O Judas my brother, I will return from Antioch, and we will be as brothers again. Farewell."

Judas tried to speak, but could not. He clasped Beriah's hand, and, turning abruptly, walked slowly back to Modin. Beriah, watching him, with all the mockery

gone from his merry dark eyes, understood. It was their first parting.

Two years later when Beriah returned to Modin, he found that his master's envoy had preceded him. For the king's soldiers had come to compel the people to sacrifice to the idols of the heathen, and the public square of Modin was filled with an eager, tense multitude, whispering tales of the Syrian king, the cities of Israel he had ravaged in his anger, the terrible punishments he had dealt out to those Jews who would not bow down to his gods. Now his soldiers stood quiet and watchful before the altar they had erected in the marketplace, like so many statues before a shrine, while the men of Modin gazed from the straight, shining figures to their priest Mattathias, who stood near by surrounded by his five sturdy sons. Sturdiest and tallest among them was Judas; he towered above them, quiet and watchful; his face was like a sword as he waited.

"Judas!—Judas, my brother!" cried a voice trembling with eagerness, and, turning, Judas gazed into Beriah's eyes. The boy was flushed and breathless as he flung his arms about his old friend. "Hast thou forgotten me, my Judas?" he reproached him. "Or am I so changed that thou dost not recognize me?"

Judas, who had uttered a low cry of joy as he drew the lad to him, now stepped back, his mouth growing hard, his eyes stern, as they wandered over Beriah's Grecian robes, the jewelled chains and bracelets about his neck and arms. "In truth, it is not easy to recognize thee," he said bitterly.

"In Antioch a rich man's son cannot dress like a bond-servant," Beriah protested. "I will lay aside the king's livery to-morrow, but now—hast thou no word of welcome for me? I have made many friends in Antioch, but none like thee, my beloved brother! Only a month ago

I was offered a post in the household of Antiochus; yet I could not bear the thought of remaining longer from Modin where I could not see thy face." With his characteristic swiftness he removed one of the golden chains he wore, and, before Judas could prevent him, flung it about his friend's neck. "Say that thou hast missed me a little," he pleaded.

"I have missed thee," answered Judas with a look in his eyes that made the simple words very eloquent. "Yea, I have missed thee sorely."

"Ah, Beriah!" exclaimed a newcomer. "And fresh from Antioch!"

"Tell us of Antiochus!" cried another. "What of the king?"

"Ay, what of the king—dare we resist him?" murmured many voices.

They pushed Beriah upon the steps of the newly-reared altar. He stood there, his slight figure poised above the upturned faces of the multitude, the sunshine stream-

ing upon his fluttering yellow garments and dark, proudly erect, head. Beriah held up his hand for silence.

" I have seen the glittering lines of the armies of Antiochus," cried Beriah. " I know his strength. He can crush all Judea as easily as a child crushes a swallow's egg in his fingers." The people swayed and murmured, for they knew that he spoke the truth. And they were afraid. Beriah leaned toward them, his face glowing, his eyes burning with excitement. " But this Antiochus is as merciful as he is strong. If ye will but yield to his will and bow before the gods he has set up in your midst, he will bestow gold and honors upon you and your children." His light hands fluttered over the shining ornaments he wore. " Should ye be mad enough to resist him—" he shrugged as he brushed the hair back from his forehead, " friends, I fear the God of our fathers will not save those who disregard the law of the king."

A long silence followed, broken only by the murmurs of the multitude. Beriah stepped down from the altar, and forced his way back to Judas. The mockery had vanished from his eyes, and, as he raised them to his friend's face, they were filled with a great fear. Judas spoke not a word; he stared straight before him, his eyes fastened upon the altar where the Syrian envoy now stood. With his strong hands he slowly broke to pieces the gold chain Beriah had flung about his neck.

" Thou art an honored man in this city," began the king's envoy, as he turned to Mattathias, the old priest. " Therefore come thou first, and fulfil the king's command: so shalt thou and thy house be in the number of the king's friends, and thou and thy children shall be honored with silver and gold and many rewards."

The five tall sons of Mattathias gathered closer about their father. From beneath the robe of Judas there glimmered the flash

of steel; or was it only the sunlight sparkling upon the chain he held in his hands? The crowd waited breathlessly for the old man's answer.

At last he spoke, and his voice was very quiet. "Though all the nations that are under the king's control obey him and fall away from the religion of their fathers, yet will I and my sons and my brethren walk in the covenant of our fathers and not forget His law. We will not hearken to the king's words to go from our religion, either to the right hand or to the left. But we will forever walk in the ways our fathers kept before us."

The envoy paled with rage. "Thou and thy sons and thy brethren shall die," he thundered, "but all who sacrifice upon the altar and do reverence unto the Syrian gods, such will the king reward with honors and great riches."

Even as he finished speaking, a Jew who had long loved the ways of the heathen in

his heart, stepped from the crowd, and advanced toward the altar. As he was about to scatter incense upon the flame, a triumphant leer curling his mouth, Mattathias wrenched the sword from the envoy's hand and plunged it into the traitor's breast. The man reeled, staggered, and fell, his fumbling hands clutching at the wreaths about the altar and pulling them down upon his lifeless face.

The envoy started forward, but he was too late. The sons of Mattathias surged forward, a living wall about their father, who stood erect in their midst, the blood-stained sword in his hand. From beneath their robes flashed swords; they were like young lions ready to spring upon their prey. Man after man from the crowd joined them, snatching swords and spears from the unprepared Syrians, as they pressed about their priest. Before they had seemed like dry wood, incapable of action; now the spark had touched them, and they were

like a devouring fire. Above them, on the altar steps, where the Syrian envoy lay dying beside the Jewish traitor, stood Mattathias like an avenging spirit, his crimsoned sword a banner above his head. His old voice rang like a trumpet blast above the shouting of the mob.

" Whosoever is zealous for the Law," cried Mattathias, " follow me ! "

" Lead, and we will follow ! " thundered the men of Modin.

Beriah from the outskirts of the crowd gazed wistfully at Judas, cold and quiet, a drawn sword in his hand. Then he turned his face to Antioch, and left the home of his fathers forever.

But on the eve of the battle of Beth Horon, the friends met once more. A man, foot-sore and weary, crept into the camp of Israel, and begged to be led before Judas, the commander of the Jewish host. Once within the tent of Judas the Maccabee, he stood swaying from very weakness,

for he had made a long journey and was well-nigh exhausted. In spite of the dust of the road and the tattered Syrian garments he wore, Judas knew him to be Beriah. They stood gazing at each other speechlessly.

At last Beriah spoke, faltering in his words, for he was very tired. "I am a fugitive from the Syrian camp. I no longer serve in the armies of Antiochus."

But Judas did not speak. His great hands played about his sword hilt.

Beriah drew nearer. "Do not turn away from me," he pleaded. "I have never known an hour's peace since the day I deserted the faith of my fathers. Something within me always cried out against my treason. I felt myself branded a coward when I saw men and women, yea, even young children, suffer torture and death rather than obey the king. Three days ago my men brought a widow and her seven sons before Antiochus. He bade

them bow to his gods and live, but they would not listen to his words. He besought their mother to plead with them, lest they all die in torment; but she implored them to die rather than forsake the Law of their fathers." He pushed back the dusty hair from his forehead, the old familiar gesture lashing Judas like a whip across the face. "That night I cast aside my Syrian armor; I broke the sword I had taken from the hand of Antiochus, and came to thee."

Judas's fingers had crept to the collar of his tunic; he seemed to breathe with difficulty. Beriah threw himself before him, and tried to catch his robe.

"Do not send me away," he urged in broken entreaty. "I lie in shame at thy feet. I am unworthy to do battle for the God I have deserted and despised; I am unworthy of thy brotherly trust, thy love. Yet give me a place among thy men, that I, too, may strike a blow for Israel and die a clean man fighting for my God."

Judas turned to the soldier who kept watch at the door of his tent. His face had grown old and weary; but he stood straight and tall, nor did he glance at the crumpled figure, sobbing upon the ground. "Give this man food, and allow him to rest before he leaves our camp," he said clearly, and passed out into the darkness. Beriah continued to sob, for his spirit was broken.

After the battle of Beth Horon, the victorious Jews found Beriah's body among their slain. The wounds were in the breast; the traitor had fallen while fighting for the God he had for a time denied. His face wore again the smile of his boyhood, and Judas the Maccabee covered his own face with his hands when he saw that look. "Brother!" he said softly, and a smile of peace trembled for a moment about his tired mouth.

THE GREAT HOPE

(A Story for the Sabbath of Consolation.)

When the Roman soldiers drove the wailing women and children through the streets of Jerusalem, only two souls came forth from the ruined home of Simon ben David. The father and his three tall sons had perished during the siege of the city, and on the day the Temple fell the wife of Simon lay dying, her new-born son at her breast. So when the soldiers drove the survivors forth into exile and slavery, only twelve-year-old Leah left her father's house, her tiny baby brother clasped in her arms.

All distinctions of rank and wealth were forgotten. Leah, whose father had been of a princely house, now limped wearily beside Nathaniel, the young son of one of his bondmen. Once Leah had been the only

daughter of a wealthy and noble family, and Nathaniel had been too humble to raise his eyes to her as she walked in the gardens of her father's estate; now, her dainty garments soiled with the dust of the road, her hair disheveled, her white face pinched and drawn with hunger, she was grateful to the young servant for his care of her, and looked upon him as upon a brother.

That night when the scanty food allowed the captives was distributed, Nathaniel managed to secure a cruse of goat's milk, and, kindling a fire, warmed the milk before he brought it to Leah for her baby brother. The child lay moaning faintly in his sister's arms. She tried to warm it on her breast and murmured loving words to it, as she had heard the mothers of other tiny children murmur when their babies were restless or ill. Nathaniel sat by her side, and his face was very tender as he watched her.

Leah coaxed the child into drinking a little of the warm milk, smiling faintly when she saw him go off to sleep. Nathaniel put out his arms for the little one, and begged to be allowed to hold him; but she shook her head.

"Thou art so tired," he said. "See, I have spread my cloak for thee, and since we shall not leave this place until daybreak, I want thee to lie down and try to sleep a little. I will guard the little one and see that he comes to no harm."

But Leah would not let him touch the child. "He is all I have in the world," she answered, "for they—the others—are gone, and I shall never see them again. Yea, I am more miserable than other orphans, for I have no home nor country, and the city of my fathers has been laid waste." Her sobs choked her as she turned her eyes toward the ruins of Jerusalem, grim and forsaken in the moonlight. "Our Temple lies desolate," sobbed the girl,

" and its golden ornaments have been polluted. Would that I had died with my mother, rather than live the daughter of a captive and homeless race."

She lay upon the ground now, her face hidden in the cloak she had wrapped about her brother. Nathaniel timidly smoothed her tangled hair, and sought to comfort her.

" Weep, if thou wilt, for those whose death has left you an orphan even as I am," he said, " but do not grieve that the Lord has afflicted Zion. For it is for our sins, and He will not keep His anger forever. Again and again have I heard my father's father say that the Lord of Israel would punish His people for forgetting Him and for their hardness of heart to the poor and the oppressed. But my grandfather also said that the Lord would only purify us through suffering, as fine gold is purified through fire—that He would destroy Jerusalem, even the Temple in the

midst of her, but that some day He would bring back the desolate children of Israel unto their own land."

Leah's sobs ceased as she listened. When Nathaniel had finished speaking, she raised her head and answered him, her voice trembling with a new hope. "I remember thy grandfather, Nathaniel. My father once told me that he was a man who walked with God. What thy grandfather spoke must come to pass. Did he indeed say that our Temple would be rebuilt?"

Here a woman among the captives broke into loud weeping. Leah's heart swelled with pity as she listened, and suddenly she clung to Nathaniel, sobbing: "But we shall not return! How can a people broken as we are ever be healed?"

"Nay," answered Nathaniel, and his eyes grew large with his dream. "Nay, He who destroys will also build up, said my grandfather. For once he told me that on

the very day the Temple was destroyed, a Messiah would be born who would some day lead our people back to Zion in triumph and with songs of gladness."

"Nathaniel," breathed Leah, half fearfully, yet with a strange joy in her white face, "Nathaniel, my father was of the line of David from which the kings of Israel have sprung. And he, my brother, was born yesterday, the very day on which the Temple fell."

They said no more, but looked at each other with shining eyes. The fire Nathaniel had kindled had long since died out, but in the clear moonlight he saw Leah's pale face, radiant with holy joy. Hardly knowing that he did so, he kissed the hem of the sleeping child's garment.

"From this day forth thou must let me serve thee and him," whispered Nathaniel in a voice that was deeply humble, yet aglow with pride. "Now lie down and sleep, and I will keep watch over thee and the

little one until morning. My grandfather would have died happy, had he known that I would be allowed to serve the child destined to become the redeemer of Israel."

When Leah awoke, the eastern sky was rosy with dawn. She turned to Nathaniel who knelt upon the ground, bending over her sleeping brother. A look at her companion's face told her the truth, and she clung to him for comfort.

It was a long time before either of the two could speak. Then Nathaniel said in a broken voice: "He was so little and weak—he could not live without his mother. He was not chosen to lead us back after all. Perhaps another child born yesterday will be our Messiah—or perhaps my grandfather did not know—and the great king of Israel is yet to be born."

Leah slipped from his arms, and, kissing her brother's forehead, covered the child's face with the cloak. She turned her eyes to the ruins of the Temple which the

rising sun clothed in a glory of crimson and gold. It was like the coronation robe of a mighty king—the king who would gather the outcasts of Israel and bring them back to their own land. She threw back her weary shoulders, and raised her head like a queen; for she remembered that she was of a royal line, that she came of a house of priests and prophets and kings.

"Nathaniel," said Leah simply, "in a few years I will grow into womanhood, and since I am of the house of David, perhaps my own son will be the Messiah."

THE GOLDEN RING

(A Story for Lag be-'Omer.)

The spring sunshine streamed through the narrow window, bathing Rachel in its pleasant warmth, as she sat upon her bed, her work-worn hands idly plucking at the small leather bag in her lap. It was empty. Until she could earn a few coins by her spinning, she would have to go hungry, unless she appealed for charity; and this the daughter of the wealthy landowner, Kalba Sabua, could not bring herself to do.

Her tired eyes fell upon the ring she wore, a richly-set ornament, contrasting strangely with her ragged garments. If she should sell the ring to Eben the goldsmith, she would be able to purchase food for many days, even a new robe and sandals for herself. But she shook her head, smiling a little wistfully as she recalled the spring day long ago when Akiba had placed

the ring upon her finger, and she had dreamed of twining the bridal wreath of myrtle amid the locks of her dark hair.

She was the only child of Kalba Sabua, in those days an heiress to his vast wealth, and very beautiful. In those pleasant far-off times many suitors sought her hand in marriage, but she would not listen to their wooing, for she loved Akiba who tended her father's flock upon the hills.

Yet not only was he poor, and ignorant of the Law, but he was said to have uttered bitter words against the teachers and sages of Israel. This had grieved Rachel, and, unobserved by her handmaidens, she had often sought out the shepherd as he watched his flock upon the hill-side, and tried to awaken in his heart a love for the Law which he pretended to despise. Slowly there grew in Akiba's heart a love for this gentle, pious maiden, and with it a great yearning to become a learned man for her sake, and to wear the scholar's crown.

" But I can never become a scholar in Israel," he said sadly to Rachel, " for I am too poor to journey to the academies where the Rabbis teach the Law. And why should I labor for many years to win a name for myself, when I am the last of my race and have no kith or kin to share my glory? "

" But thy glory will be my glory," Rachel answered him quickly. " Tell me, Akiba, if I should become thy wife, wouldst thou, out of love for me, become first a pupil, and then a teacher, of the sages? "

So they were betrothed in secret, for they feared the anger of Rachel's father, who, they knew, would never accept an ignorant shepherd as his son-in-law.

" And in truth I have naught but my poverty to offer thee," sighed Akiba. " I cannot even purchase thee the ring of betrothal."

Then, laughing softly, Rachel drew from her bosom a gold ring richly set with gems and of a fantastic pattern. " It was my

mother's betrothal ring," she said; "my dear mother, who died when I was born. My father tells me that I am very much like her, but that I cannot believe, for her old nurse often speaks of her grace and loveliness. I know that she rejoices that I have found a husband, and is glad that her ring will seal our betrothal."

That very day Akiba placed the ring upon her hand, and it had never left her finger, not even during the trials of their greatest poverty, after Rachel's father, in his anger at their marriage, had driven them out into the world. They had eaten bitter bread, and slept upon straw, but Akiba would never permit his wife to part with the betrothal ring. Even when he desired to travel to the academy at Lydda, Akiba had forbidden her to sell her golden ornament, though he knew that he could not set out on the journey with an empty purse.

Sitting upon her bed with the warm spring sunshine falling about her, Rachel

recalled the day when she sold her beautiful long hair for a few pieces of gold. She could still remember her husband's look of glad surprise when she counted the money into his hand; she could still smile to recall his grief when she removed her veil and he caressed her shorn head with trembling hands as he whispered: "Some day, best of wives, I will buy thee a golden Jerusalem for thy head.* Be patient, and wait till I return."

And Rachel had waited! Her neighbors had flung rude jests at her; others sympathized with her loneliness and poverty, and considered her a deserted wife, and this was still harder to bear. No one believed that Akiba would return to her, and to-day even Rachel felt hope dying in her heart as she sat twisting the ring upon her thin, brown finger.

* A golden head-band stamped with the image of Jerusalem was worn by the wealthy Jewish women of that day.

She was roused from her musings by a knock at the door. Upon the threshold stood an old man leaning upon a staff and dressed in rags.

"Bread, my daughter," he murmured faintly, "give me bread!"

He tottered across the floor and fell upon the bed, half-swooning from very weakness.

Rachel sprang up to help him, and then stood perplexed. What had she to give him? And yet to turn away the aged man was impossible for the wife of Akiba, who had once given a beggar the very straw from the bed on which she slept. Should she go to a neighbor and beg food for the starving old man? Her cheeks flamed at the thought of confessing that there was not a morsel of bread in the house. Yet she must have food for this feeble man, not only for one day but until he felt strong enough to go on his way; for, since he had come to her hut, Rachel felt that she, and no one else, must supply all his wants.

Almost unconsciously she twirled the glittering ring upon her finger. Her husband had never permitted her to sell it for their own needs, but she knew that he would wish her to sacrifice the ornament for the sake of the old man's comfort. She wavered only for a moment; then, promising to return at once, Rachel left her house, and hurried toward the shop of Eben the goldsmith.

Out on the street, she was struck by the unusual tumult in the market-place. "Why are so many gathered in front of the synagogue?" she asked a neighbor who pushed past her.

"Hast thou not heard? A famous Rabbi, a new teacher in Israel, has come to our town, followed by all his disciples," answered the woman.

They reached the crowd that blocked the street before the synagogue. The townspeople swayed and jostled each other in their eagerness to catch a glimpse of the

great Rabbi who had just arrived in their midst. Then there was silence as all pressed forward, eager to listen to the stranger's words.

Rachel's worn hands clasped themselves upon her breast, and her parted lips trembled. Surely, surely, she was dreaming, for she had ceased to hope ever to hear Akiba's voice again. And yet—perhaps—God was good to her, and, after all these years of waiting, Akiba had come back as a disciple of the Rabbi whom the people had gathered to honor. Half fearfully, moving as one who dreads to break her dream, Rachel slipped through the crowd, her face pale and eager with the prayer she dared not utter. And as she looked upon the new teacher in Israel, she stood swaying for a moment, for she saw that he was indeed Akiba her husband, coming back to her at last. Then the long years of loneliness fell from her, and it seemed as though he had never left her side.

Unmindful of the multitude, forgetting her rags and her unloveliness, she ran to him as eagerly as in the old days when he had tended her father's flock upon the hill-side.

Those standing about him were pushing her aside. "Stand back, woman!" said one of the disciples. But Akiba had already seen her. He held out his arms to her, and drew her tired head to rest upon his breast. "What I am," he told his disciples, "I could never have become, if it had not been for her."

Hand in hand, silent in their great joy, they walked slowly to the hut where he had bidden her good-bye so many years ago. It was not until they stood upon the threshold that she was able to speak. "Our ring," she murmured, withdrawing her fingers from his, "I did not sell it after all. And now we can help the old man who came to me for bread."

And Akiba said: "Thanks to God, beloved, we shall begin our new life

together in aiding the unhappy." And he kissed his wife. She pushed the door open.

"Where is he?" she asked in wonder, a note of awe creeping into her voice.

For the room was empty; but on the bed where the old man had rested lay a wreath of fair myrtle, such as brides wear upon their wedding day, and the air was sweet with its fragrance.

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